

Permanent emergency? Augustus establishes the principate

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Augustus claimed to be loyal to republican tradition, but in fact established his autocratic rule. How did he do it? John Rich here traces the way in which Augustus' plans evolved over the course of his reign, and how the division of responsibility for ruling the provinces, which was initially presented as a short-term measure to establish peace, became a permanent feature of the imperial regime.

Augustus, the first Roman emperor, made his rule secure by giving it a republican guise, epitomized in his preferred title *princeps*, 'first citizen'. But how did he contrive to square this circle? This question has spawned a vast modern literature, but an important part of the answer has received little attention: Augustus skillfully presented his powers as a limited-term provision for a specific purpose, but over the course of his long reign the emergency arrangements became permanent.

Octavian, the future emperor, had first acquired supremacy in alliance with Antony and Lepidus in autumn 43 B.C. They took sweeping powers, including the right to appoint the magistrates and provincial commanders, but their position was formally justified as for a temporary emergency. They were appointed for five years, with the official title of triumvirs 'to settle the republic' (*rei publicae constituendae*), and with the specific assignment of ending the civil wars. In 37 they took a second five-year term. By the time it expired, Lepidus had been ousted and Antony and Octavian were on the brink of war. Each promised to return power to the senate and people after victory.

Octavian's defeat of Antony and Cleopatra made him sole ruler of the Roman world. He now had to make good his promise. He can never have contemplated giving up the reality of power, but he had to avoid open autocracy: Caesar had gone down that road, and his assassination had been the result. Octavian returned to Rome in triumph in August 29 and remained there till summer 27. During his stay he took various measures to make it appear that the state had been brought

back to the old republican ways, holding a census, revising the senate list, and having the temples cleaned. In addition, he made the required new arrangements about his own position.

The early years of the principate: Octavian to Augustus

In his *Res Gestae*, the account of his achievements he left behind at his death, he claimed that in his sixth and seventh consulships (i.e. 28 and 27 B.C.), 'I transferred the republic from my power to the control of the Roman senate and people'. Thus the settlement, which modern writers often date just to 27, extended over two consular years. In 28 he took various steps relating to domestic administration, probably including the restoration of free elections to the magistracies. In an edict he proclaimed the annulment of such of his ordinances as were illegal and unjust, and this was commemorated on the coinage: a recently discovered *aureus* of Octavian is dated on the obverse to his sixth consulship and on the reverse shows him seated on a magistrate's chair holding out a scroll, with the legend *LEGES ET IURA PRÆSTITUIT*: 'he restored the statutes and laws to/for/of the Roman people' (the interpretation is disputed).

There remained the armies and the provinces. On 13 January 27 B.C., in a speech to the senate, Octavian announced their return, thus completing the 'transfer of the republic'. The senators protested, and Octavian then agreed to a compromise, evidently planned from the outset, under which he divided the provinces between himself and the Roman people.

The senate and people then rewarded him with special honours: a civic crown above and laurel trees before his house door; a gold shield attesting his virtues in the senate house; and a new name – Augustus.

Proconsular power: pacifying the provinces

In the people's provinces the governors were proconsuls selected in the traditional way by the lot. For his share Augustus took Gaul, Spain, Syria, and Egypt, and with them most of the legions, and their governors were his deputies, appointed at his pleasure. This was a brilliantly ingenious solution to his dilemma: if he had returned all the provinces to proconsuls at this stage, with civil war so recently over, he would have risked losing control and perhaps renewed civil war, but if he had continued to appoint all the governors, he would have remained an overt autocrat. However, to announce that he would retain even a share of the provinces as a permanency would have been wholly incompatible with his republican claims. Augustus therefore declared that he was taking his provinces just for a specific purpose and at the most for ten years. As the historian Dio explains, he claimed that his provinces were those which were unstable or had dangerous neighbours, and that he would pacify them within the ten years. The division of the provinces was thus, like the triumvirate, presented as a temporary expedient to meet an emergency need. The triumvirs had claimed to take their powers to end civil war. Augustus now set himself the new goal of establishing peace against external foes throughout the empire.

Augustus thus held out the promise that, once the ten years were up, he would not retain *imperium*, the magisterial power of command, but just the informal respect and prestige which he had earned by his services to the republic, a position symbolized by the honours conferred on him in 27 and by the title *princeps*. If that had happened, his supremacy would indeed have been based, as he was to claim

in the *Res Gestae*, just on 'authority' (*auctoritas*). In making this undertaking in 27, Augustus may not have been hypocritical. In the event, the division of the provinces was to become permanent. However, he may not have planned for this at the outset, and may well have thought that in time he might feel strong enough to rely for control on informal authority alone.

The pacification promise should not be dismissed as a mere pretext. Augustus was obliged to act on it to justify his share of the provinces. His external policies have been misinterpreted by modern scholars as a grand design to give the empire defensible frontiers or alternatively to conquer the world. In fact, they were shaped by the need to fulfil his commitment to pacifying his provinces.

Augustus and his commanders made considerable progress with the pacification programme within the allotted ten years. The Roman conquest of Spain was at last completed by bringing the mountainous north-west under control. The new province of Egypt was pacified and campaigns were conducted beyond its borders. Above all, Augustus wisely resolved the long-standing problem of Parthia without a war: in 20 B.C. Roman captives and standards were recovered by a diplomatic settlement, misrepresented on coins and elsewhere as a humiliation for the Parthians. However, the work of pacification was not complete, and in particular little attention had yet been paid to Gaul.

During this period Augustus also made adjustments to his own position. At first he continued to accept annual re-election to the consulship, but this was too unrepugnant to continue and he resigned the consulship in summer 23. He thus became a proconsul through his tenure of his provinces, and adjustments were made to his power then and again in 19. It did not thereby become lifelong, but remained liable for renewal with his provinces. Augustus did accept a lifelong grant of the power of the tribunes in 23, but, since this did not confer *imperium*, he could still hold out the prospect of a leadership based just on informal *auctoritas*.

As Dio tells us, Augustus in 18 B.C. accepted a renewal of his powers for five years, insisting that this would suffice, but shortly afterwards he took a further five years. He used the initial period to complete the organization of Gaul and, through his deputies, to bring the Alps under Roman control, chiefly through the co-ordinated campaign by his stepsons Tiberius and Drusus in 15 B.C. Thus by 13 B.C., when he came back from Gaul, Augustus had completed the pacification of all his provinces, and his return was appropriately commemorated by the establishment of the altar of Augustan Peace. By then, however, he had taken the

additional five years. This extension was doubtless prompted by the invasion of Gaul by German tribes in 16 B.C.: contrary to what has often been supposed, it was surely this event, and contemporary disturbances in the Balkans, which led Augustus to undertake the great advance into central Europe, carried out by his forces in 12–8 B.C. under the command of Tiberius and Drusus.

Augustus' power-play: manipulating appearances

In 8 B.C., with a show of reluctance, Augustus accepted a ten-year renewal of his powers, and the process was repeated in A.D. 2 and 13. Thus from 8 B.C. the renewals became routine. No doubt they were still justified as necessary to ensure the security of the provinces. The need to establish firm control of the new conquests in Germany and the Balkans would have provided a ready argument, made all the stronger in A.D. 6–9 when revolt in Pannonia was followed by Varus' disaster and the loss of Germany. But from 8 B.C. there was no longer any real prospect that pacification might be completed and the division of the provinces terminated. Thus the division which had been originally presented as a temporary expedient had become a permanency. Whether Tiberius, when he succeeded Augustus in A.D. 14, acknowledged any time limit to his tenure of the imperial provinces is unclear. Later emperors accepted them for life.

Augustus may have intended this outcome from the outset, but his actions in 18 B.C. suggest the contrary. If he had always intended to renew the division of the provinces up to his death, why did he accept only a five-year renewal then? At that point he may have been seriously considering that in a few years he might be strong enough to rely just on his informal *auctoritas*, without direct provincial command. By 8 B.C. he had abandoned any such intentions. Dynastic developments may have played a part: by then Agrippa and Drusus were dead, and Augustus' ambitions were focused on the promotion of Gaius and Lucius Caesar as heirs. By A.D. 4, they were both dead, and Augustus had to concentrate on securing Tiberius' succession.

It would have been perilously autocratic for Augustus to accept his share of the provinces as a permanency in 27 B.C., but by 8 B.C. his regime was so well established that such concerns had receded. Augustus nonetheless still kept up the pretences, insisting on his reluctance at each renewal. In his posthumous *Res Gestae*, he maintained that from 27 B.C. 'I excelled all in *auctoritas*, but had no more official power (*potestas*) than the others who were my colleagues in each magis-

tracy'. The claim was true, if at all, only as a narrow technicality. For many years before his death, Augustus had exercised his *imperium* freely in Rome and throughout the empire, and the provinces under his command had held all but one of the legions.

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